THE GEOGRAPHY OF DISTINCTION: THE NATION AND ITS REGIONS 1790–1927

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THE completion in the period 1927–1934 of the *Dictionary of American Biography*[1] with its 13,633 biographies of non-living notables, selected for prominence and achievement, gives us our first real opportunity to study the geography of distinction in the United States.[2]

In the space at our disposal we will consider three main questions: 1. What state and regional differences are found in the production of men of distinction by periods from 1790 to 1860? 2. What occupational differences are found by regions and periods? 3. What are the trends of migration of notables? For the Great Divide in American History we take the Civil War and separate the notables into two groups—those dying before and those dying after January 1, 1866. For our regional divisions we follow Howard W. Odum's sixfold division of the United States into Northeast, Southeast, Middle States, Northwest, Southwest, and Far West.[3] Only the first three are of major importance here.

There are 13,633 notables listed in the *Dictionary*. Of these, 78.4 percent or 10,684 are native white and thus can be related to a necessary population base in our calculations. This factor plus regional variations in ethnic composition dictated the necessity of excluding the foreign born, Negro, and Indian groups. It is noteworthy, however, that about 16.5 percent of those listed in the *Dictionary* are foreign born, 4.5 percent Negroes, and 0.6 percent Indians.

Only by disregarding the time factor can these figures be related to base populations. Thus in 1890 foreign-born whites

* With the assistance of Nadia Danilevski, Statistical Assistant, Institute for Research in Social Science, University of North Carolina. Special counts of those listed in the *Dictionary* were made by W. G. Piersel and Floyd N. Cox for the Study of the Southern People. The author is indebted to the Study and to Howard W. Odum, Director of the Institute, for the opportunity of reporting this preliminary account of one of its projects.

[1] Hereafter referred to as the *Dictionary*.

[2] Cf. Dumas Malone, "The Geography of American Achievement," *Atlantic Monthly*, 154, pp. 669–79 (1934). This first analysis while not quantitative has the great advantage of being written against the background criteria on which the selections were based.

[3] Howard W. Odum, *Southern Regions of the United States*, Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina Press, 1936.

composed 15 percent of the total population (16.5 of the notables), the average Negro population between 1790 and 1860 was 16.8 percent of the total for the same period (4.5 percent of the notables), and Indians in 1880 were 0.3 percent of the total (0.6 percent of the notables). American-born women, it may be pointed out, comprise only 4.7 percent of all native-white notables. Obviously, mothers and wives who shared in the struggles and had a large part in accounting for the "fame" of notable men are, by the very nature of things, omitted from separate listings.

I

After the number of notables was obtained, it was necessary to compute base populations in order to compare various states and regions in the productivity of men of distinctions. Since the growth of states was rapid and irregular, complicated at the same time by extensive internal migrations of native whites, it seemed best to compute ratios by short periods—in this case, decades. We may call these ratios, "birth rates of notables," employing the simple formula: average number of notables born per year during the decade divided by the average white population during the same decade. The resulting ratio was then multiplied by 1,000,000 to give a simple birth rate of notables. These rates could be computed only for the period from 1790 to 1860, for there is no census before 1790; and we could not continue computation for decades later than 1860, because many notables would still be living and thus not included in our ratios.[4]

The results give support to the oft lamented view that great men are becoming fewer. Both in the nation and its regions distinction, it seems, is passing from the leaders to the masses. The numerical chances of becoming famous are greater during the founding of a small nation than in maintaining the country after it becomes more populous. Stated more precisely the chances of achieving distinction as measured by the criteria of the *Dictionary* are diminishing. In the decades from 1790 to 1819 the "birth rates" of notables was above 19 per million, from 1820 to 1860, it progressively fell by decades from 14.7 to 10.8 to 6.3 to 3.7 (Figure I).

For all regions the decade 1810–1820 is the highest point in the birth of great men. The Northeast ranks highest in the production of notables, reaching a high "birth rate" of 23.1; the Southeast is next with 14.6, the Middle States with 12.6. All successively fall until the decade 1850–1860 shows the Northeast with 5.4, the Middle States with 2.8, and the Southeast with 1.9 notables born per million population. Outstanding among the states are Massachusetts which reaches a birth rate of notables of 40.4 per million, while South Carolina and Virginia have rates of 17.8 and 16.0 respectively in their best decades. Ohio leads the Middle States. All other regions, as we shall see, because of later settlement have had to develop their great men out of imported articles.

Dividing the average annual births of notables for the period from 1790 to 1860 by the average population for the same period, we can arrive at an "average birth rate" of notables for the whole period.

[4] We felt justified in going as far as 1860, since we saw that notables who died in 1866 are about all covered in the group born before 1800 (see page —); this makes a lag of 66 years, and we have 66 years between 1860 and date of the *Dictionary* (1927–1934).

For the purpose of "ranking" we computed average birth rates of notables for the whole period (1790–1860), omitting from states ranked those which had only 20 notables or less for this period. We chose 20 to eliminate "Other Regions" which have not been studied satisfactorily.

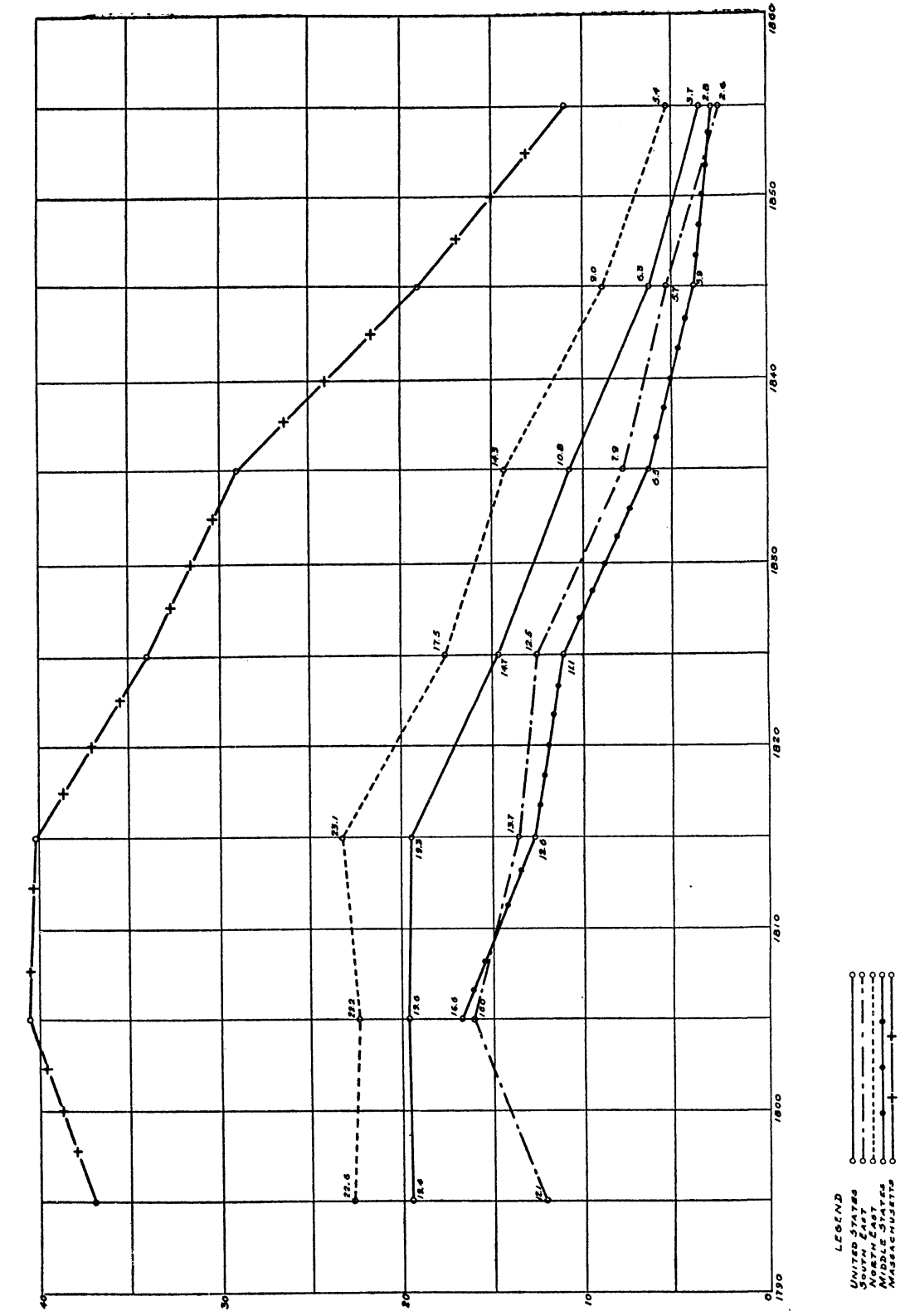
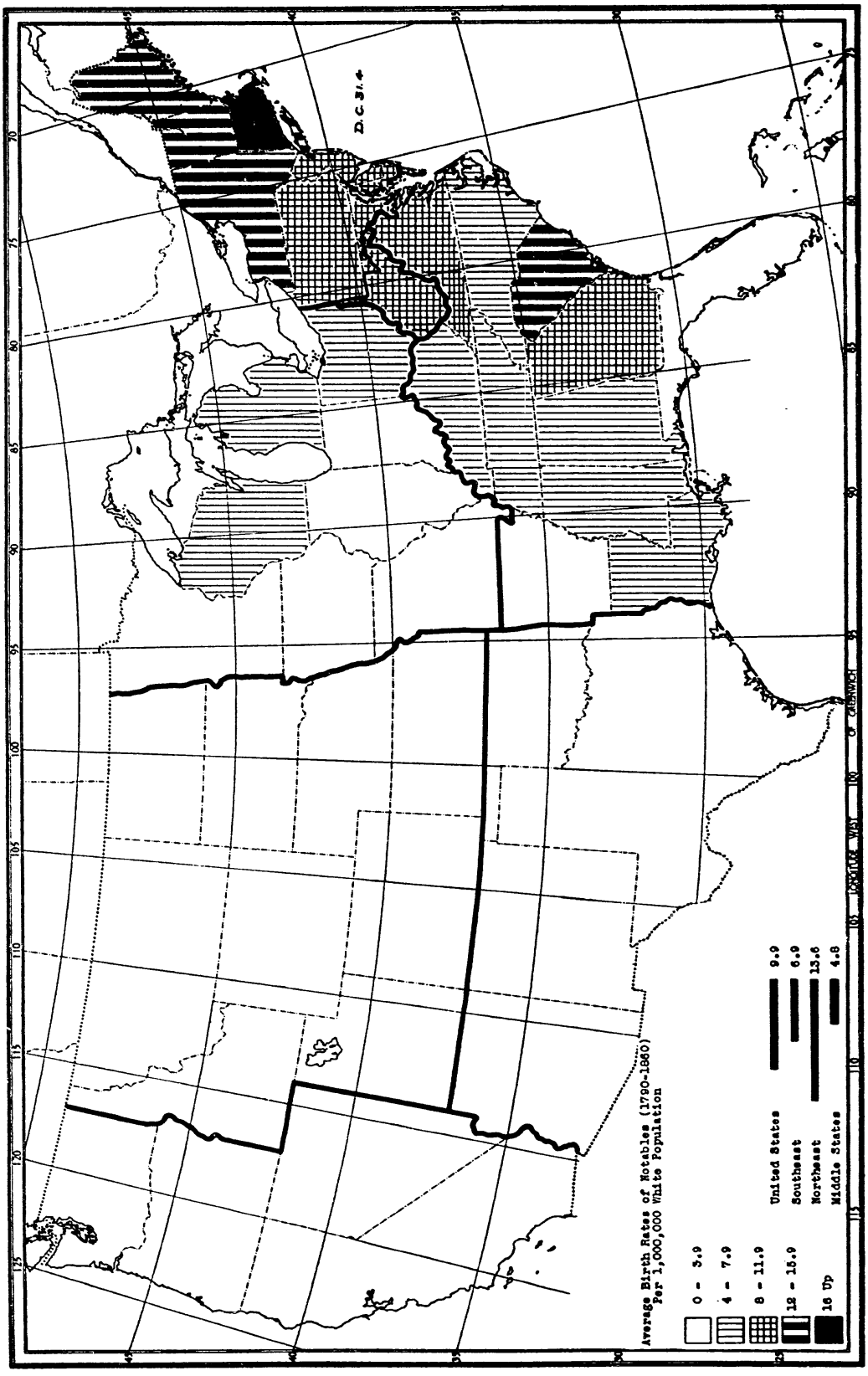


FIG. I. BIRTH RATES OF NOTABLES (1790–1860) PER MILLION NATIVE WHITE POPULATION



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AVERAGE BIRTH RATES OF NOTABLES PER MILLION NATIVE WHITE POPULATION, 1790–1860

The range is from 31.4 for the District of Columbia[5] to 3.2 for several states. The map shows the high rank attained by New York and the New England states. South Carolina leads the Southeast.

II

The callings in which men most often rise to distinction are shown to vary greatly both by periods and by regions. Basic to this analysis was the grouping of all careers listed in the *Dictionary* into three main headings with many subdivisions. These are: (1) Political Culture, including those prominent in government and politics, law, and war; (2) General Culture including those prominent as leaders in religion and philanthropy, education, literature, medicine, art, science, and in social movements; and (3) Technology and Production, including leaders in engineering, invention, finance and commerce, industry, agriculture, crafts, transport and communication. Last comes a small group called others and composed of explorers, outlaws, famous athletes, etc. The classification of notable men according to the functions performed in the culture differs greatly from the task of setting up an occupational distribution. Table I shows how characterizations given by the *Dictionary* were translated into our scheme. Notables listed as distinguished in several fields were distributed fractionally as, for example, George Washington was listed as one-half statesman and one-half general.

Before the Civil War the avenues leading to fame were somewhat different as may be seen from Figure II. Leadership in our early period centered in statecraft, law, and war. After 1865 Political Culture shows the greatest decline, falling from 43.5 to 30 per cent of the total. Preeminence passed in the second period to General Culture which increased its share of the total from 41 to 53.7 percent. All items in General Culture increased except religion and leaders of movements. Technology and production increased its share of the famous from 13 to 16.6 percent, but in spite of our economic achievements industry and the crafts seem underrepresented, in the *Dictionary*. The difficulty of achieving notice in these fields may indicate that here achievement is as much a matter of group cooperation as of exceptional leadership.

Regional contrasts are notable and in the main are what might be expected. The Northeast in the first period shows the greatest concentration of its leadership in General Culture, 45.7 percent compared to 25.8 percent for the Southeast (Figure III). Religion leads all fields of distinction in the Northeast region embracing 357 notables, 16.4 percent of all their great in the first period. Southern born notables were concentrated in Political Culture where 63 percent of all its leaders were developed as compared with only 37.6 percent for the Northeast. In law the variation in favor of the Southeast was not so great, 15.2 compared to 13.6 percent; but in government the Southeast's lead was 29 to 11 percent. In war the same region led 18.8 to 12.8 percent. In technology and production the distribution favored the Northeast, 15 to 6.2 percent.

In spite of the decline in political development during the second period, the Southeast had 50.5 of its leaders in this field as compared with only 21.8 percent for the Northeast and 29.4 percent for the Middle States (Figure IV). No region has as large a porportion of its

[5] The District as the Mecca of the Great and near great drew temporary residents from all regions. They gave birth in Washington to notable children who with justice can hardly be assigned to any region.

notables in any calling as the South had in these three: Government, 21.7 percent; War, 15.3 percent; and Law, 13.5 percent.

TABLE I

FUNCTIONAL CLASSIFICATION OF NOTABLES BY CALLINGS

I

POLITICAL CULTURE

Government: statesman, president, senator, governor, diplomat, legislator, mayor.
Politician: political leader, party leaders.
Army: soldier, general Indian fighter, spy.
Navy: naval officer, privateersman.

II

GENERAL CULTURE

Religion and Philanthropy: clergyman, theologian, bishop, missionary, apostle of peace, philanthropist, religious worker, humanitarian, masonic ritualist, reformer, settlement worker, relief worker.
Education: educator, teacher, professor, lecturer, orator, librarian, philosopher.
Literature: author, writer, poet, playwright, almanac maker, publicist, newspaperman, journalist, critic, editor, lexicographer.
Medicine: physician, surgeon, hygienist, epidemiologist, ophthalmologist, dentist, veterinary.
Art: artist, sculptor, architect, musician, dancer, singer, engraver.
Science: astronomer, geographer, chemist, naturalist, anatomist, hydrographer, geologist, metallurgist, mathematician, statistician, ethnographer, philologist, scholar, economist, sociologist.
Leaders of Movements: labor leaders, labor agitators, Revolutionary leaders: Revolutionary heroine, Revolutionary patriots, signers of Declaration of Independence, women suffragists, loyalist, patriot, unionist, Mother of Confederacy, secessionist, and abolitionist.

III

TECHNOLOGY AND ECONOMIC PRODUCTION

Engineer: civil, mechanical engineer.
Inventor.
Commerce: merchant, trader, slave trader, fur trader, chandler, bookseller, business man.
Finance: banker, financier, insurance man.
Industry: manufacturer, ice king, meat packer, mechanic, lithographer.
Agriculture: planter, farmer, pomologist, horse-breeder, cattle man, agriculturist.
Crafts: carpenter, cabinet maker, silversmith, glass blower, printer, glazer.
Transport and Communication: Transport: R. R. builder, R. R. director, shipbuilder.
Aviation: aviator, pioneer in aviation.
Telephone.

IV

OTHERS

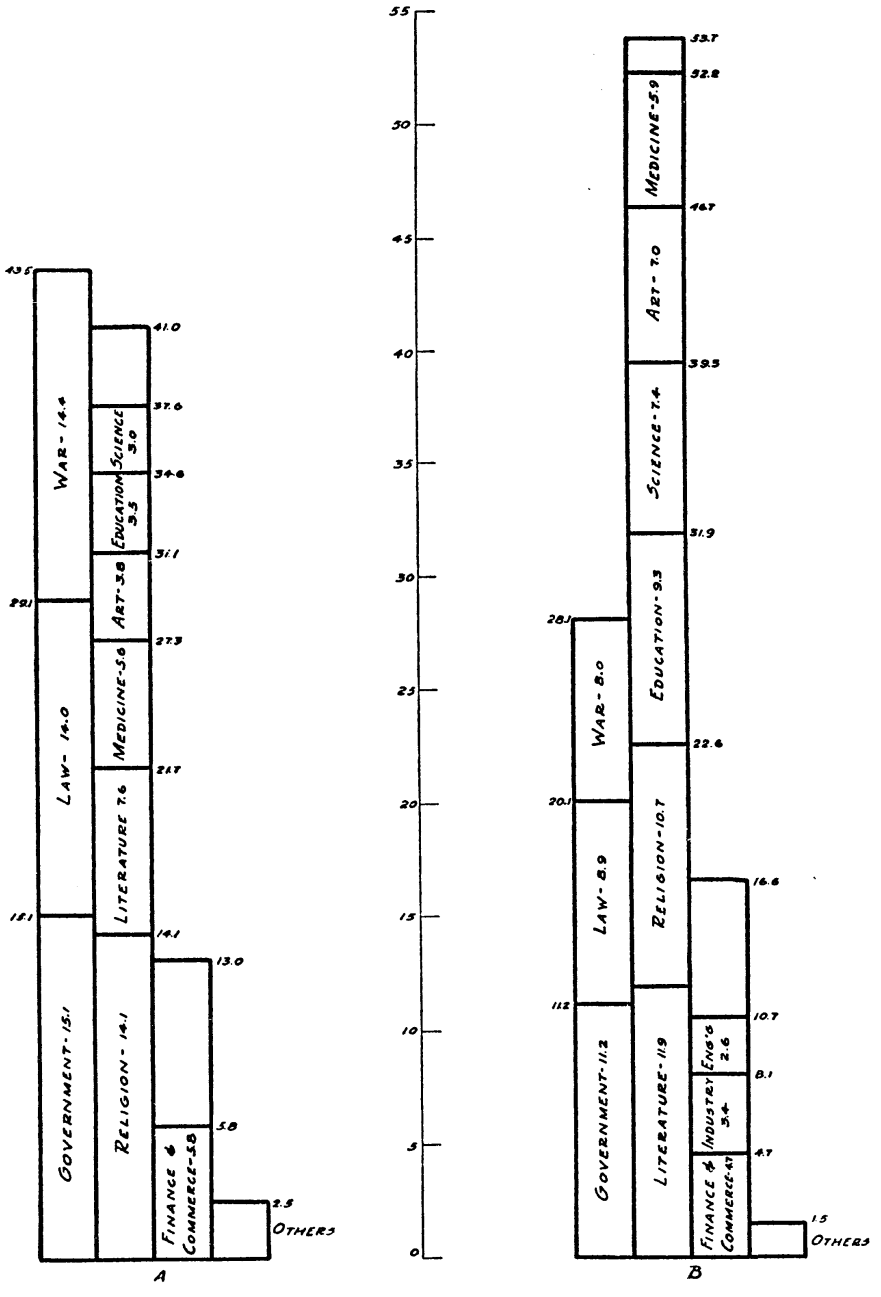
Explorers: traveler, explorer, pioneer, scout, colonial ranger, frontiersman, trapper.
Adventurer: bad man, desperado, burglar.
Athletics and Sports: tennis player, coach, horse racer, base ball player.

native born in this field. The proportion of religious leaders declined still further being outstripped by literature in every region. In the Northeast, in fact, 674 writers, 12.3 percent, composed the largest single brace of notables in the region. Scientists reached as high as 8.0 and

In General Culture the Northeast now had 58 percent of its native born leaders; the Southeast only 37.3. By now the Middle States had 53 percent of their

9.0 percent of all notables in the Northeast and Middle States but remained at only 4.0 percent in the Southeast. Educators and artists loomed larger in all regions.

Economic culture also claimed a greater share of the famed, 17.5 percent for the Northeast, 15 percent for the Middle States, but again the South lagged with only 10 percent. Five and four-tenths



A- Notables Dead Before 1866
B- Notables Dead In 1866 and After

Fig. II. Occupational Distribution of Notables Living before and after 1866

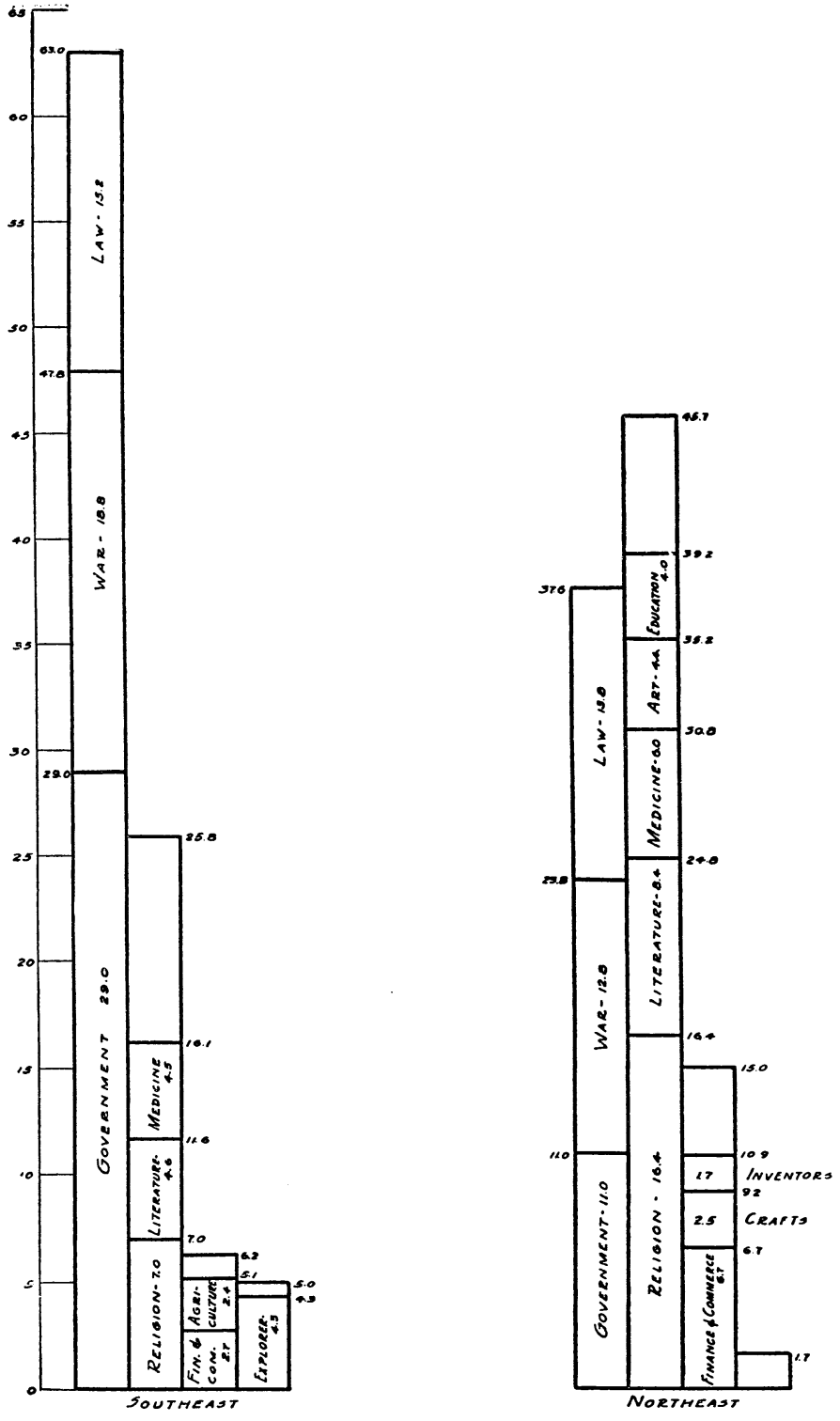


FIG. III. OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF NOTABLES DEAD BEFORE 1866 BY REGIONS

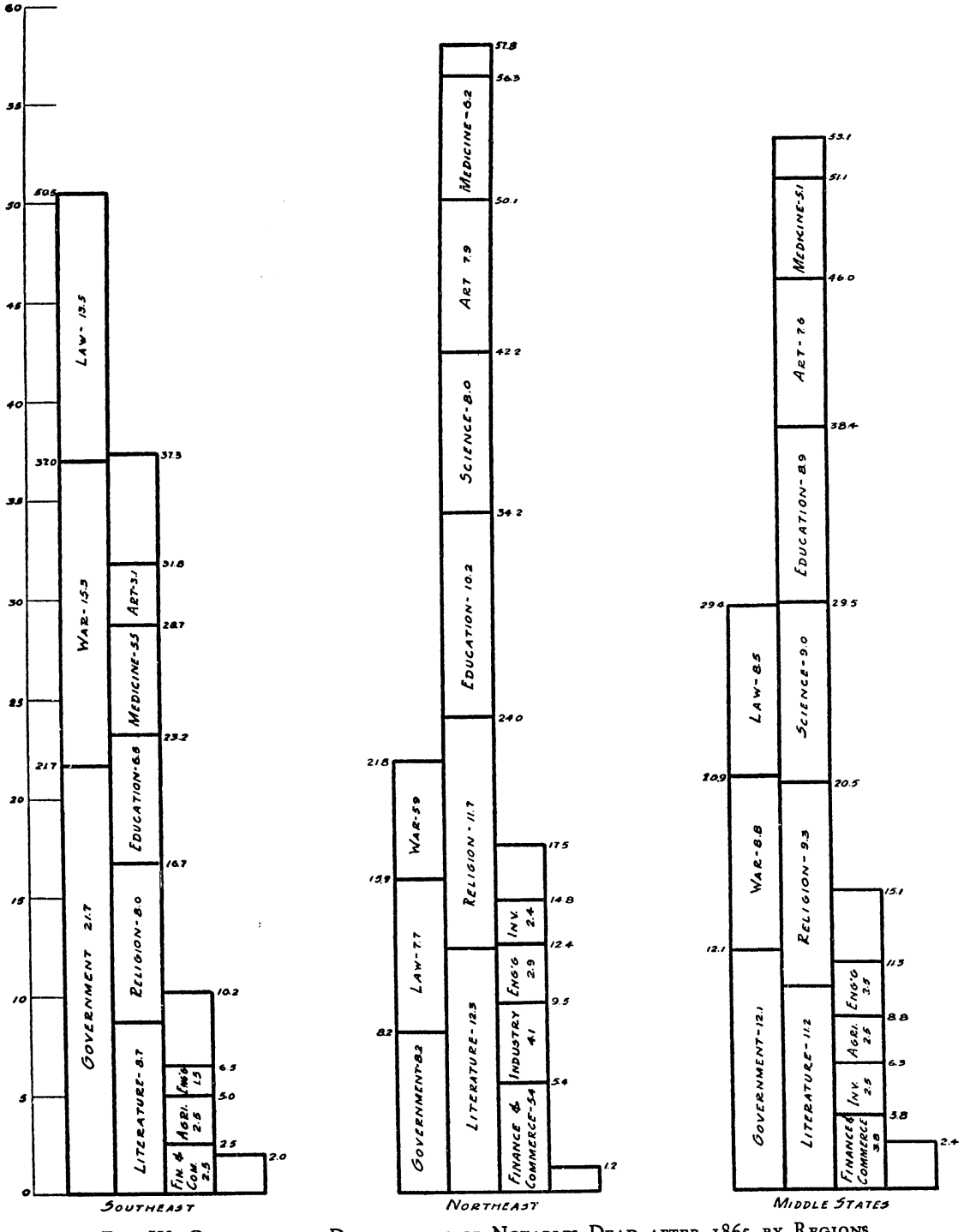


FIG. IV. OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF NOTABLES DEAD AFTER 1865 BY REGIONS

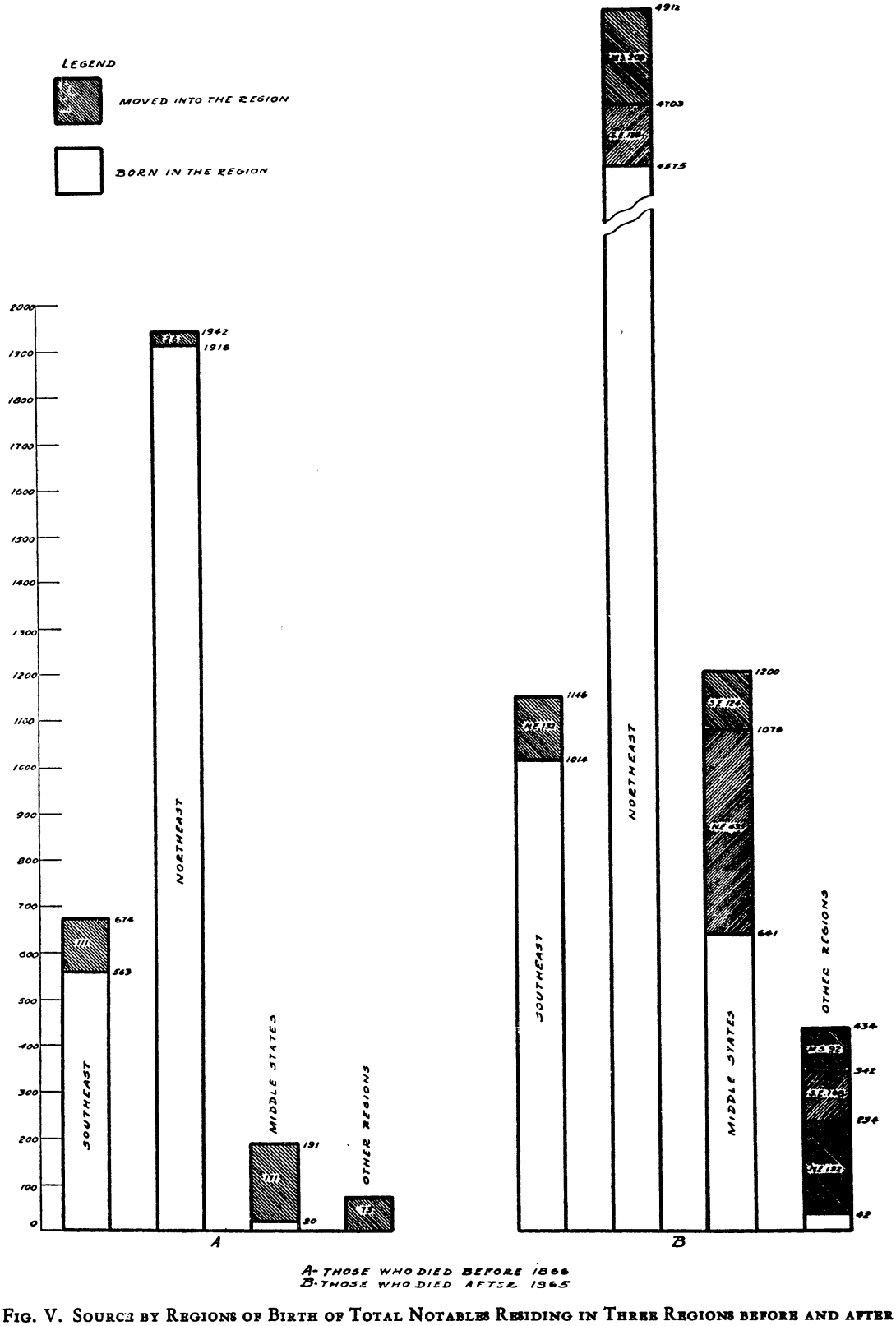


FIG. V. SOURCE BY REGIONS OF BIRTH OF TOTAL NOTABLES RESIDING IN THREE REGIONS BEFORE AND AFTER JANUARY 1, 1866

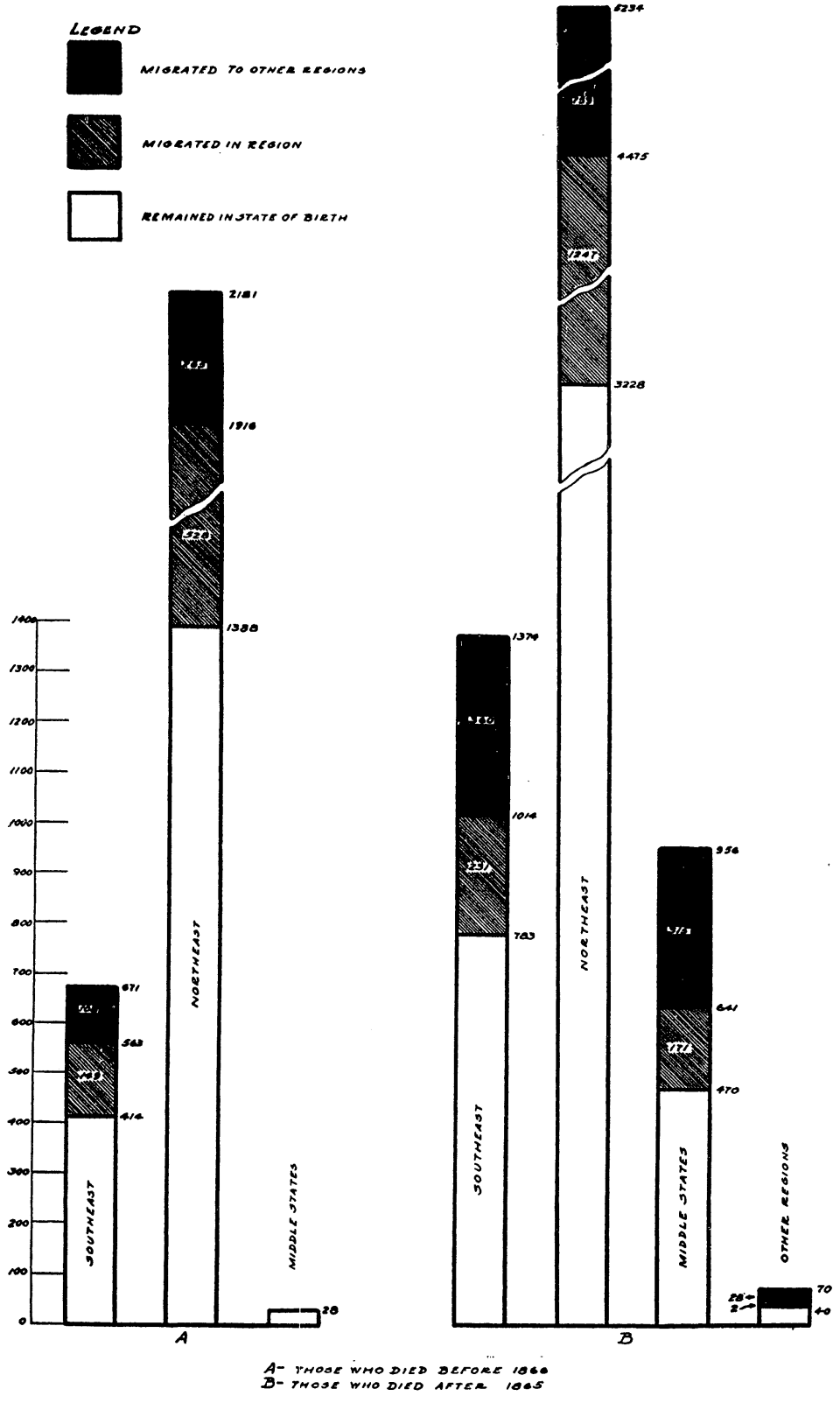


FIG. VI. MOBILITY OF NOTABLES BORN WITHIN THREE REGIONS BEFORE AND AFTER JANUARY 1, 1866

percent of the Northeast's distinguished were in Commerce and Finance as compared to only 2.5 percent for the Southeast. The Northeast produced 279 noted Inventors and Engineers as compared to only 37 for the Southeast. Yet in spite of its agrarian culture the South had only 2.5 percent of its notables listed as outstanding in agriculture.

III

Despite the great mobility of the American people, Figure VI shows that the majority of our notables have attained distinction in the state of birth. Figure V shows the geographic sources of all notables living in the regions by periods; Figure VI shows the mobility of notables born within the regions by periods.

Of 2,880 native whites who had completed notable careers before 1866, 63.1 percent remained in their native states, 23.4 percent migrated within the region of birth and only 13.5 percent migrated to another region. The greatest movement, that of 171 persons, was into the developing Middle States, the least movement was that of 26 notables to the already developed Northeast (Figure V). From the migrations of the famed the Northeast suffered a net loss of 239; all other regions gained.

The next period of our history shows an increase of interregional mobility. Of the 7,634 whose careers were completed after January 1, 1866, 59.2 percent remained in the state of birth, 21.6 percent migrated within the native region, and 19.2 percent migrated to other regions. In the interchange the Northeast suffered a net loss of 402 notables, the Southeast a net loss of 212 notables, the Middle States a net gain of 247 notable people. All other regions, Northwest, Southwest, and Far West have given birth to only 70 notables (all after 1865) and have lost only 28 of these to other regions (Figure VI). They have received however 468 notables from other regions, giving them a net gain of 440 notables. Seventy-three of these moved early, and had completed their careers before 1866 (Figure V).

In all, the Northeast has exported the most talent, some 1,024 souls including many ministers and teachers; the Southeast comes next with 468 including many leaders in statecraft, law, and war. Both the greatest total movement and the greatest net migration of notables have been to the Middle States, 733 and 410 respectively. To what environment should go the credit for developing this talent, to the state of birth or to the state of achievement, is beyond the scope of this brief statistical analysis.

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